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C O N F I D E N T I A L TASHKENT 002473

DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/CACEN, EB

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/13/15
TAGS: PREL ECON PGOV PINR UZ
SUBJECT: GULNORA KARIMOVA LOOKS TO IMPROVE HER IMAGE

CLASSIFIED BY AMB. JON R. PURNELL, FOR REASONS 1.4 (B, D).

¶1. (C) Summary: In the last month, several Uzbek publications have carried articles about the good works of First Daughter Gulnora Karimova. The articles focus on her selfless giving, charity work, and business acumen. One, an interview with Russian scholar Aleksi Malashenko, discusses Gulnora's chances of replacing her father as president in ¶2007. The discussion of the honest, hardworking Gulnora, looking out for the best interests of her country, likely irks the many business people who have been crushed by Karimova and her greed as well as the general public, who view her as something of a robber baron. This media campaign is definitely a move by Karimova to improve her image, possibly as the first step to a 2007 presidential run, but also likely as a means to silence critics within elite Uzbek circles.

PATRON OF THE ARTS, CHILDREN AND THE POOR

¶2. (U) On September 1, Tasvir, a widely read family magazine, published a two-page article praising Karimova's donations to schools and orphanages throughout the country. As a member of "Women's Meeting," an organization charged with the welfare of children, families and the elderly, Gulnora put on a children's production of the Lion King in schools in Samarkand, Bukhara, Jizzax, Gulistan, Fergana, and Kokand. Gulnora's personal charity fund, "Mekhr Nuri" (Lights of Love or Mercy) also works throughout the regions and has provided furniture and other school supplies to facilities in Namangan, Syrdarya, Kokand, and Bukhara. The youth-movement-run newspaper Kamolot praised Karimova for her role in giving scholarships to under-privileged students under the Forum of Culture and Art of Uzbekistan. Karimova is chair of this foundation. The first Daughter also heads the Center for Political Studies.

SOCIALLY RESPONSIBLE BUSINESSWOMAN

¶3. (C) An August 18 article, also in Tasvir, praised Gulnora for her role in upgrading the services of the cellular telephone company Uzdonrobota. According to the article, Uzdonrobota's technology was outdated. Gulnora then "bought" the company, modernized the equipment and found the right partner, Russian MTS, to continue key developments. (Note: The price MTS paid per subscriber was significantly above the market rate. Gulnora, who acquired the company at rock bottom rates, made a considerable sum of money on the transaction. End note.) In this piece, Gulnora noted that businesses are like precious stones, they only obtain value once they are processed and improved. (Comment: This statement likely irks the multitude of business people Gulnora has usurped or put out of business through her government connections. Most of these businesses were profitable in their own right, which is what attracted the First Daughter to them in the first place. End comment.)

STANDING ON HER HIGH MORALS AND PRINCIPLES

¶14. (C) In an interview published on September 8, Karimova told an Uzbek paper, Darakchi that she is a highly principled person who listens to her conscience. She stressed that she can't stand treachery or lies. She sees herself as open and even-handed, and demands the same from those around her. She even went so far as to say that people treat you the way you treat them, and if you don't treat others well, you will "find yourself in a blind alley." (Comment: The many people crushed by Karimova would likely relish the chance to catch her blind in an alley. End comment.)

THE NEXT PRESIDENT?

¶15. (C) On September 6, Ferghana.ru published an interview with Russian professor Aleksi Malashenko in which he discusses the potential of a Gulnora Karimova campaign for president in 2007. While, Malashenko, a member of the Moscow Carnegie Center and Professor at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations, noted that Karimova's chances of becoming president were infinitesimally low because of the scandals surrounding her business ventures, simply mentioning the possible in a public forum raises Garimova's profile.

COMMENT: WHAT'S BEHIND THE PRESS CAMPAIGN?

¶16. (C) The unusual series of articles promoting the virtue and selflessness of Gulnora Karimova is likely part of a larger strategy to clean up the First Daughter's image. Most Uzbeks see Karimova as a greedy, power hungry individual who uses her father to crush business people or anyone else who stands in her way. Even with the press campaign to improve her image, Gulnora is continuing to do business, pressuring and shutting down competitors. This charm offensive will not likely make her more popular; she remains the single most hated person in the country.
(Comment: We have no polling data to support that statement, but we stand by it. End comment.) The chances of a successful 2007 presidential run for Karimova are slim to none, as neither the people, nor, more importantly, the elite, would support her. In addition, it is unlikely that many in this still very conservative culture would accept the idea of a female leader. High-level female officials are still tokens, relegated to traditional female issues. That said, the political climate is changing rapidly here, and these articles could be a trial balloon.

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